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ABSTRACT

The history of immigration to Norwalk and Westport, Connecticut, from the Revolutionary War period to 1979 is presented. The reading is part of a project to investigate the ethnically varied cultural heritage of the Norwalk-Westport area. It is arranged in two major sections. Section I focuses on Westport--described as an attractive suburban town with a history of involvement in the Revolutionary War, rapid economic growth during the 19th century, and a high degree of interaction among immigrants from many European nations. Groups identified as most common in the 1900 census of Westport are Irish, German, Swedish, Danish, Russian, and Hungarian. Information is presented for each of these groups on life-style, work, recreation, schooling, and religious observances. Section II traces development and settlement of Norwalk. Purchased in 1640 from the Indians, Norwalk developed in the 1800s as a regional industrial center. Among immigrants who were attracted to Norwalk with the hope of securing jobs were Irish, Italians, Hungarians, and Slavs. Beginning in 1950, a new wave of immigrants settled in Norwalk. Most recent immigrants are Puerto Ricans, Costa Ricans and blacks from North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia. The document concludes with information on the intense rivalry that has characterized Norwalk proper and South Norwalk from 1870 to the present. (DB)

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HISTORY OF

WESTPORT AND NORWALK

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SACRED HEART UNIVERSITY

SO 011 511

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The New Colossus

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame.
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightening, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your stories pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me.
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Emma Lazarus

Since the discovery of America, millions of people have streamed through the "golden door." "A New World was brought into existence to redress the grievances of the Old." They came from every continent, were of every color, represented every ethnic group. They came for a variety of reasons; for liberty, for equality, to own land, for ideological and religious beliefs. They fled from turmoil, oppression, revolution, famine. One thing became a common denominator, they all became Americans.

In recent years because of the appearance of the "roots" books, there has been a tendency to minimize the importance of the "melting pot" theory. When Frederick Jackson Turner advanced the frontier thesis in the last decade of the nineteenth century, it was almost universally accepted. Nothing has changed, it is as credible in 1979 as it was in the 1890's. The "melting pot" has been the subject of playwrights, poets,

and politicians. It still has validity. Within it one can take pride in color, ethnic heritage, family heritage, religious affiliation, political ideology. In our pluralistic society the mosaic that results from the commingling of all the emigrants that came through the "golden door" is peculiarly American. The huge mosaic which has evolved is the sum total of all its parts. Two small but important parts are Norwalk and Westport.

Westport

The history of Westport has indeed been varied and colorful. From the Revolutionary period, through incorporation and economic growth in the nineteenth century, Westport has prospered, evolving into the attractive suburban town which it is today.

A fleet of twenty-six ships, flying the flag of Great Britain, sailed slowly up Long Island Sound on the mild, sunny, afternoon of April 25, 1777. The residents of Green's Farm (the area now known as Westport) saw the ships heading eastward up the Sound, and expected them to continue to Fairfield. They were shocked to see the ships turning inland, off the eastern end of Cockenoe Island and Compo Beach.

The British troop ships, under the leadership of Major General William Tyron, dropped anchor at approximately 4:00 p.m., and two thousand men began to come ashore. In the following three days, the soldiers marched to Danbury, where they staged a raid on an American supply depot. The British

battled the Americans, burnt the town and village centers, and fought off strong resistance at Compo Hill to get back to their ships.

When the Green's Farm inhabitants had first sighted the approaching British ships, they immediately sent out riders to alert the Connecticut militia in Fairfield, Norwalk, and Danbury of the Redcoats' invasion. The British landing on Compo Beach was unhurried. The first division, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Bird, secured the beachhead by occupying two strategic hills: Compo hill and Bennett's rocks. Landing operations were complete by 10:00 p.m. By 11:00 p.m., the British were drawn up on Compo hill, ready to begin their march towards Danbury.

The invading army traveled along Compo Road, through the swamps, along the Saugatuck River to the King's Highway, the Boston Post Road. Seventeen Weston militiamen, hiding behind a stone wall, surprised the Readcoats at the intersection of Compo and the Boston Post Roads with gunfire. Several British enlisted men and an officer were wounded in the Post Road skirmish, while the American troops escaped injury. The British regrouped and continued their march on Danbury by way of the Cross highway and the Redding road. Thus quiet returned to Green's Farm as the enemy left the area on their raid twenty miles inland.

Westport again became a theatre of war three days later, when General Tyron's men retreated along what is now Route 33 in Wilton, pursued by General Arnold and one thousand American

troops. During this retreat through Westport, the British were fired at from behind trees, rocks, and walls; these tactics were similar to those used after the battles of Lexington and Concord.

General Arnold, hoping to cut off the enemy's retreat at the Saugatuck Bridge, marched his men south along the Saugatuck. Upon reaching the bridge ahead of the British, General Arnold strengthened his position by ordering his men to occupy Old Hill, on the east bank of the river. However, the British outsmarted Arnold, perhaps due to the advice of Tory sympathizers. The British troops led by General Erskine, forded the river some distance north of the bridge, and bypassed General Arnold's position. Random shots fired at the British troops by Colonel Lamb's long range cannon, scattered the well-disciplined troops, almost causing them to run in panic.

After the British crossed the river, General Arnold moved his troops from Old Hill to Compo Hill, in a last-ditch effort to block the retreat of the Redcoats. Arnold's troops, accompanied by a cannon barrage, made two successful attacks on the British, forcing them back from two defensive positions on Compo Hill. The British were exhausted and nearly out of supplies; the situation was becoming critical. The British then decided to attack with bayonets, in order to employ the one weapon in which they knew that the American citizen-soldier were not skilled.

The assault was made by the Fourth, the Fifteenth, Twenty-seventh Regiments. "The Fourth and Fifteenth Regiments,

principally, dashed over the stone wall and drove the Rebels off with considerable loss," one British officer was reported to have remarked. The bayonet attack is said to have demoralized the American troops to such a great extent, that no further effort was made to attack the British. British embarkation began at 4:00 p.m., and proceeded undisturbed while all the men, guns, and equipment were taken aboard. A number of American patriots were killed at Compo Hill, and are buried in the cemetery in Green's Farm.

General Tyron and the war returned to Green's Farm two years later, in July, 1779. The British had landed a force at Green's Farm, after burning Fairfield and Norwalk. The Green's Farm Congregational Church and thirteen homes were torched by the Redcoats before they left.

Not only the Revolutionary War era of Westport's history is interesting; the nineteenth century brought important economic and political changes to the Green's Farm area. In April, 1835, Daniel Nash and others from Fairfield, Norwalk, and Weston made application for a charter to incorporate the town of Westport. The charter was granted on May 28, 1835. In August of 1835, the first town meeting following the appointment of town officials was held, for the purpose of restricting the amount of oysters to be taken from the waters of Westport in any one day.

Organized church life in Westport began early in the eighteenth century. The first church in town was the Green's Farm Congregational, which was established in 1711. The

Congregational church was burned during the Revolutionary War, and was rebuilt. In 1790 the Methodists came in, and established the Saugatuck Methodist Church in 1852. The Episcopalians built their own church in 1835, and later built another church in Saugatuck in 1860. Although the Catholics appeared in Westport in 1853, they did not get their first church until 1860.

Agriculture was the major means of earning a living in Westport around the time of its incorporation. Grain, hay, butter, and cordwood were the principal items being brought to market, and these items were transported in ox carts. Onion growing, a very profitable enterprise in Westport, had its peak from 1860 to 1890. Southport White onions sold in New York for ten dollars a barrel, while the Red and Yellow onions went for a dollar and a half and up per barrel. The farming labor was provided by immigrants from New York, who were boarded by their employers. In the 1830's, a prosperous shipping (mostly produce) trade, from Westport to New York, had begun.

By the early twentieth century, agriculture had begun to lose its economic importance, some small industries began, and Westport gradually changed into a suburban town. There had been some industries in Westport at the time of its incorporation; namely the Kempers Tannery (1835) and the Lees Manufacturing Company (1814), which made ribbon and twine. The remaining small industries began after the Civil War, and such varied products as ping-pong balls. apple brandy, embalming supplies, boxes, and weedkillers were produced.

Up until the middle of the nineteenth century, the people of Westport and the surrounding area were almost entirely of English descent. Then the spread of the Industrial Revolution began to turn the farm lands into industrial areas, attracting many ethnic groups.

The 1900 census of Westport shows many different groups settling in the Westport township.

Irish (see addendum) and Germans

The two most common groups were the Irish and the Germans. These two groups seemed to populate the town almost as much as the native Americans.

For the most part, these people owned farms in the area or were laborers at one of these farms. The Irish and Germans also worked at some of the businesses, like the florist shops and shoe stores.

Sweden and Denmark

Immigrants from Sweden and Denmark also settled quite a bit in the Westport area at the turn of the century. These people were also farmers for the most part.

Russia and Hungary

Immigrants from these two countries followed the Swedes and Danes in population size in early 20th century Westport. These people worked farms and also got into the early factories in the area.

To a lesser extent, the Swiss, Scots, French, Austrians, Italians, and Poles settled in the Westport area around 1900.

As the twentieth century progressed, the ethnic makeup of the town and area changed. Factories and other industries continued to grow, attracting more immigrants from the Italians, Germans, Irish, Hungarians, etc. The population of the town is basically white.

New York City has had a great influence on the development of Westport. Artists, writers, actors, poets, architects, business executives, have established homes in the Westport area, and have helped the town to expand and change. This just added flavor to the "melting pot" theory.

Addendum

There is no attempt to single out the Irish, particularly because of the many ethnic groups that were in Westport. However, these recollections were made available to me by Mrs. Mary Howard Grumbly and the writer would welcome letters and recollections from other ethnic groups.

"These recollections of comments concerning Westport were made to me by my grandmother, Mary Condon Howard, a resident of Westport from 1852 (approx.) to 1872 when she and her husband Timothy Howard took up residence in Norwalk.

Both were residents of Westport when in January, 1857, they were married in St. Mary's Church, Norwalk.

These comments are relevant to Irish in Westport, 1850-70.

The Square in Westport

There was a handpump in the middle of the square. Many of the houses around the square depended for their water on this pump, carrying pails daily to their homes.

The Square was the scene of the weekly market when farmers and their wives brought their produce to town to sell. It was also a time for visiting. My grandmother said she used to enjoy drinking a beer on market day with Mrs. Sweeney, a "Far-downer" (Mrs. Sweeney was from Cork.)

When there was a mission in St. Mary's, Norwalk, night and early morning the Irish Catholic women of Westport gathered in the Square, then walked in a group through Peat Swamp to Norwalk. Some of the women would carry little girls in their arms. It was considered unsafe to walk alone or in small groups, or even to drive one or two in a buggy. During this walk, the women carried lanterns. The men met the women in the Square on their return to Westport.

Work and Recreation

Most of the Irish worked on farms and most lived in Saugatuck, some in Green's Farm (onion fields, I believe, were extensive.)

A few engaged in a trade or business. Hugh Campbell (grandfather of General Philip C. Wehle) was a tailor. James Condon had a grocery store.

In the Fall, the hay in and the crops harvested, the Irish farm families enjoyed a hayride and a hugh clam bake at Compo, on the point where the cannon is. There was usually a beautiful moon at that time.

School

For the most part, the Irish children attended Saugatuck School which was a wooden structure on the site of the present brick Saugatuck Elementary School.

Church

Although there was a mission church in Westport, the parish for Westport Catholics was St. Mary, Norwalk. First Communion, marriages, etc., were performed there. At that time, St. Mary was a wooden structure on Chapel Street which was burned by the Know Nothings in 1854 (Catholic Ency. 1910) on or around July 4, I believe. Later the cross was sawed off by the Know Nothings.

The road between Westport and Norwalk was dusty and friends in Norwalk living near the church invited Westport friends to bring their ceremonial clothes to their houses and prepare there for a nice appearance in church.

This wooden structure still exists on Chapel Street as a tenement.

When the present stone structure on West Avenue was begun, the Irish Catholic men, after doing a day's work of their own, dug the cellar of the church.

Banking

My grandfather did his banking in Southport in the red brick bank in Southport, still standing close to the waterfront. I assume other Irish did their banking there, too."

Norwalk

Much of the territory that now comprises the town of Norwalk was purchased by Roger Ludlowe from the Indians in 1640. Ludlowe's purpose appears to have been to start a settlement between Stamford and his new home in Fairfield. A wilderness

zone of nearly 20 miles separated the two places, a zone that Ludlowe believed could constitute an Indian menace. The name of "Norwalk" was taken from the name of the Indians who sold the land to Ludlowe, the "Indians of Norwalke."

The main body of settlers arrived from Hartford, CT, in 1651 and settled in what is now East Norwalk. In her book, The Romance of Norwalk, Elsie Danenberg cites three reasons for the establishment of the initial settlement in East Norwalk; 1) the cite was easier to defend, 2) it afforded a broader view of the sea and harbor and, 3) the plains of East Norwalk presented fewer difficulties than the hills of Norwalk and South Norwalk. (p. 37)

The settlement gradually grew in population and from its beginnings in East Norwalk the town center was shifted to "the point of the rocks," now known as Norwalk proper. Also expanding was the town of South Norwalk, which comprised the lower portion of the old township.

In 1850, Norwalk's chief industry was a boot and shoe factory, which employed some 500 men and women from the town's total population of 4,650. Smaller industries of that time included a cotton mill, tanneries and a hat and cape factory that employed 83 people. As the town's population steadily increased so did the two industries that were to become the backbone of Norwalk's economy, hat making and oyster fisheries.

One of the earliest, and largest, hatters was the Crofut & Knapp Company, established in 1858, which, by 1929, employed 1,500 workers. A major source of revenue for the town of

Norwalk and its people, the hatting industry was crippled by a strike in 1884 which culminated in violence. In 1884 business was declining and Crofut & Knapp offered their employees a 25% wage cut and 1,000 workers walked off their jobs. On January 22, 1885, the Crofut & Knapp factory was bombed; the damage was extensive but no one was killed. The violent reprisals, however, were not confined solely to this company for another hattery, C.E. Doty, was burned down on December 1. The strike ended when a group of hatters, though union men, decided to return to work in a non-union shop rather than starve. The return to work, coupled with the importing of hatters from elsewhere, signalled the end of the walkout. Another strike in 1909 occurred but was not as extensive as its predecessor and appeared to have minimal impact on the industry.

Oysters were plentiful in the Sound off Norwalk and the oyster fisheries claim Norwalk's other major industry. The Indians learned early that oysters could be sustaining when game was scarce. Prior to 1784, there were little restrictions on the gathering of oysters and this lack of limits resulted in the wholesale plundering of Connecticut oyster beds. Norwalk, in 1721, passed a law prohibiting all except Norwalkers from gathering oysters.

1800 marked the beginning of oyster planting, a small operation which grew and spawned other businesses such as opening oysters and transporting them inland for sale or to use as barter for port, grain or cloth. By 1845, oyster planting had begun in earnest and, as Elsie Danenberg commented:

"Norwalk had the honor of having introduced steam into the oyster industry and setting an example followed by the rest of the world." (p. 351)

The business of both industries, hatting and oyster fisheries, gradually declined, the former being relocated to Danbury, CT, and the latter's output slowed down due to a "poison oyster" scare and the depletion of oysters in the waters off Norwalk.

An interesting side to this brief history of Norwalk to 1900 is the intense rivalry that exists, to this day, between Norwalk proper and South Norwalk. Under a charter granted by the Connecticut Legislature on July 15, 1870, South Norwalk, formerly called "Old Well," was made a city with 2,000 people. A fierce tradition of rivalry had developed between the two towns. In 1901, Rev. Paul Moore of the South Norwalk Congregational Church remarked that he had considered the rivalry amusing until he discovered that in town meetings, Norwalk would regularly vote against South Norwalk even to the extent of vetoing public improvement that could beneficial to both factions. At the celebration of the 250th Anniversary of the Charter of the town of Norwalk, Rev. Moore delivered a speech in which he hoped that the anniversary would mark the beginning of a new unity between the two and that from "this time onward, let us have harmony, fraternity and reciprocity in our town."

Such bitter sectional feelings existed between the towns that gang wars were frequent and for some time boys and young

Norwalk, settled in 1649, has an area of over 26.6 square miles and is located on the Boston Post Road and the Merritt Parkway. This city of 83,000 is situated on Long Island Sound with good waterfront sites available for commercial and residential uses and a municipally owned public beach.

Norwalk has a wide diversification of industry with 200 industrial establishments producing a variety of products; among them: belts, handbags, air conditioning components, plastics, and electronic devices and instruments. Employment is stabilized and this combined with moderate city taxes, stimulates home building. 75% of the people own their own home.

There are 24 public schools, including two senior high schools, five middle and one vocational school, one Catholic high school, 16 elementary schools, a Community College and a Technical College.

With its proximity to Boston and New York and its blossoming industrial cities such as Hartford, New Haven, Bridgeport and Norwalk, Connecticut, was an attractive choice for immigration during the latter part of the 19th Century and into the 20th Century. In fact, in 1938, with the exception of Rhode Island and Massachusetts, Connecticut had a larger proportion of foreign stock in its population than any state in the Union.

From the arrival of the first settlers in Connecticut, mostly from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, until almost the beginning of the 19th Century, Connecticut remained almost 100% English. Towards the end of the 18th Century the increase in

population was counterbalanced by the first wave of westward migration from Connecticut to the West and Mid-West. The Irish were among the first immigrant groups to settle in Connecticut, leaving Ireland due to overpopulation, famine, crop failure, etc. However, the chief factor responsible for the great influx of all immigrant groups, not solely the Irish, was the hope of building a better life or, stated in more economical terms, the chance to secure a better job, to provide a future. By 1860, almost 3/4 (55,500) of the foreign born in Connecticut were Irish. From 1890-1920 the Irish maintained numerical leadership among all immigrant groups.

The 1880's and early 1900's marked the greatest influx of Italians, a group which, by 1920 had surpassed the Irish. In 1961 the Italian population in Connecticut numbered 61. By 1900 there were 19,000 Italians in Connecticut and after 1900 the Italians exhibited the most startling increase of any group in Connecticut. The Italians came from primarily poor agricultural villages in Southern Italy and "Little Italies" sprang up in Hartford, New Haven, Waterbury, New Britain and Torrington. Norwalk's Italian population were a relatively isolated community, mostly emigrants from the tiny island of Ischia off the coast of Naples. This settlement, which bordered the Hungarian community of South Norwalk nurtured the traditional Italian "way of life," i.e., food, language, close-knit families and religious practices. One Norwalk resident recalled her father's stories about Italian street festivals and holidays, usually commemorating a Saint's feast day.

At the celebration of the 250th Anniversary of Norwalk's Town Charter in 1901, Rev. C.M. Selleck gave an address elaborating the role of Norwalkers in war, in which he quoted:

"Breathes there a Norwalk son
With soul so dead,
Who never to himself hath said;
This is my own native town?"

"On the contrary," continued the minister, "today our depth of feeling is voiced in these lines:

"Open my heart and you will see
Graven inside of - Italy?"

The early traces of another immigrant group, the Hungarians, can be found in the 1880's. The story of the Magyars of Norwalk began in 1889 when a little Hungarian girl was killed in the "Springwood" section of South Norwalk. Because of this accident local people realized that a new ethnic group, which spoke no English and had no religious center or minister, was growing in their midst. A young Slav, John Petro, was engaged as a Bible reader to the Hungarians. In 1893, Mr. Petro was replaced by Mr. Gabriel Dokus, a young teacher from the town of Fony in northern Hungary. Rev. Dokus had a large following in his district and was influential in bringing other Magyar families to Norwalk.

Initially, the Magyars emigrated for two reasons: 1) the oppressive political conditions in Hungary, and 2) the traditional reason for emigration: economic opportunity. During the Depression about 60 families came to Norwalk from Pennsylvania,

attracted by reports of better job situations and the fact that a substantial Magyar colony had already formed in Norwalk.

In 1936, there were about 5,000 Magyars in Norwalk, the second largest concentration in Connecticut (the first being Bridgeport.) Then the Magyars began coming to Norwalk, many found employment in the expanding hat industry or as caretakers of the large greenhouses and nurseries around Norwalk. By 1936 about 80% of the Norwalk Magyars were employed as laborers, chiefly in the hat factories, but also in the oyster fisheries or textile plants.

Besides the Hungarian Reformed Church, there is a Catholic Hungarian Church situated on Cliff Street in South Norwalk. The church, St. Ladislaus, was founded on July 15, 1907, and is presently 85% Hungarian. It was established to accommodate the Hungarian Catholics of Norwalk and South Norwalk who previously attended English speaking churches. Parts of the celebration of the Mass are conducted in Hungarian and the Gospel is given in both English and the Magyar tongue. The "Our Father" is recited in Hungarian. St. Ladislaus celebrates the traditional Catholic rites but observes June 27th, the Feast Day of St. Ladislaus, with a picnic and Hungarian foods and music. At Christmas the carols are sung both in English and Hungarian, and at Easter baskets of food are blessed before Mass. Every Sunday radio station WLNK has a "Hungarian Hour."

The Magyar Community is located in South Norwalk in the Springwood section, sometimes referred to as "Whistleville," a name acquired when the trains ran on the ground there. This colony is somewhat isolated physically from the rest of Norwalk

because of its location on the edge of town and the hills surrounding it on two sides.

Recently (as far back as the 50's) the "new wave" of immigrants have been from the Hispanic countries. The vanguard of the Spanish speaking population have been the Puerto Ricans who have steadily migrated to such eastern urban areas as New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Bridgeport, CT, and a large number have settled in South Norwalk. Many of the Puerto Ricans relocated in South Norwalk are from the city of San Lorenzo in Puerto Rico. Two factories in Norwalk, the Zell Corporation (now defunct) and Charles of the Ritz were almost exclusively manned by Puerto Rican workers. Several residents have mentioned one Hispanic whose sole responsibility was to bring more workers from Puerto Rico, usually without providing adequate housing or enlightening the new men to even the most rudimentary benefits that they were entitled to by law. Many Puerto Ricans, however, are expanding to areas like East Norwalk and other areas and many are now homeowners.

Besides a large Puerto Rican population there has been such a steady influx of Costa Ricans that Norwalk now has the largest Costa Rican community, outside of Costa Rica, in the East. For the most part these new Hispanics are professionals, sometimes doctors or educators, and are already moving beyond South Norwalk.

The total black community in Norwalk has reached about 15,000, mostly spread within the inner city and employed in industry. In 1950 there were barely 1,200 blacks in Norwalk.

The majority of blacks initially migrated from North and South Carolina (with some from Virginia) and each state formed their own social clubs and sponsored dances.

During the first urban renewal in Norwalk, many blacks were left without housing provided and a large number moved up the line to Bridgeport. The blacks concentrated in South Norwalk are being provided with a variety of social services; everything from job training to night school to drug and alcohol counseling, but more is needed to deal with the ever increasing black population.

For a very readable, detailed, comprehensive account of the history of Norwalk, I recommend you read the recently (January, 1979) published book entitled Norwalk, co-authored by Deborah Wing Ray and Gloria P. Stewart